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ABSTRACT

The amount and quality of time available for instruction were studied in the Chicago, Illinois, public schools. The report focuses on the basic structures of time and how teachers use them to create learning opportunities for their students. Data are from a 3-year series of school and classroom observations from 1994 to 1996 made in 8 elementary and 7 high schools. The team of researchers observed more than 200 teachers and more than 1,000 periods of instruction. School time was coded as a series of activity segments, and these were analyzed to develop descriptive accounts of how time proceeds through the school year. The analyses demonstrate that the problem of not enough time is a cumulative result of many issues, each of which requires its own redress. Isolated workshops on time management are not the answer. Instead, teachers need integrated programs of teacher development in the context of a school-based professional community. In addition, to deliver quality instructional time, teachers must have some noninstructional buffer zone that absorbs the logistical and managerial demands of school life and the personal and social needs of children. Observation of skilled teachers indicates that 20 to 25% of the school day must be seen as serving these functions. Therefore, to have 300 minutes of instruction in a school day, the day must be 360 to 400 minutes long. Taking the problem of instructional time seriously may be one of the most powerful basics the school system and community can support. (Contains 6 figures, 31 endnotes, and 55 references.) (SLD)

# Improving Chicago's Schools

Consortium on Chicago School

# It's About Time:

## Opportunities to Learn in Chicago's Elementary Schools

Improving Chicago's Schools

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December 1998

# It's About Time:
## Opportunities to Learn in Chicago's Elementary Schools

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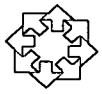

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| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Time Basics | 5 |
| Good, Special, and Bad Days | 13 |
| Good, Special, and Bad School Weeks | 21 |
| Interpretive Summary | 27 |
| Endnotes | 31 |
| References | 33 |

# Introduction

It is difficult to visit schools and not notice how quickly time slips away. Over the past several years, Consortium researchers studying instruction in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) have been similarly struck by how constrained time for teaching and learning is. During visits to schools and classrooms, we saw instruction cut short by all kinds of planned and unplanned events. "Not enough time" to meet all the demands placed on them was the universal complaint of the administrators and teachers we met.

The amount and quality of time available for instruction directly shapes school outcomes and student achievement. In Chicago, the allocation and organization of instructional time seems especially overwhelmed by the challenges at hand. For example, at the same time the Chicago public elementary schools strive to overcome decades of low achievement, they continue to operate one of the shorter school days in the country.[1] The base CPS school day typically delivers less than 240 minutes of total instruction. Even more alarming is the erosion of instructional time across the school year. Of the 180 school days provided, fewer than 125 are fully devoted to grade-level, academic work. The cumulative impact of annual and daily start-up routines, special programs and events, holiday slowdowns, test preparation periods, and a steep drop in academic work during the last six weeks of the school year, results in an enormous loss of much needed learning time. Indeed, this report suggests that many Chicago students experience not the intended 900 hours of annual instruction, but something much closer to 500 hours.

Over 60 percent of Chicago's students remain behind grade level norms in achievement. Recent studies by the Consortium suggest that closing the achievement gap in Chicago will require advancements in both the quantity and the quality of instruction provided by the schools.[2] These findings underscore the challenges the school system and the community face as they continue to work to develop more effective schools. Yet it is easy to imagine the response of caring teachers and others to the instructional deficits cited. "How is it that we are to teach more material and cultivate greater intellectual skill in the same time frame? How are we to provide more rigorous academics without further weakening opportunities to learn music, arts, and athletics or to develop character and citizenship?"

Unless we directly address such questions, the prospects for continued improvement among Chicago's elementary schools are limited. In order to do this effectively, we need to recognize how time is actually appropriated across the school day and the school year. This report describes the multi-layered nature of time in schools, the erosions that occur at each layer, and the full toll of their accumulated impact. It suggests a wide range of school and district actions to strengthen instructional time for CPS teachers and students. Together with other recent Consortium reports on the quantity and quality of instruction in the schools, we hope this report will stimulate continued improvements to the fundamental supports and standards for instruction in the schools.

## How We Studied Time in Chicago's Schools

This report is shaped by an "opportunity to learn" framework that has guided recent Consortium research on instruction in the schools. Thus, it focuses on the basic structures of time and how adults use them to create learning opportunities for their students. We are most concerned with the amount of instructional time schools and teachers ultimately deliver to their students.

We use three basic concepts to discuss instructional time. We begin with allocated time, which is scheduled time for instruction. Within allocated time are two sub-categories. General instructional time describes time actually used for academic and non-academic learning, including gym, art, music, etc. (We do not isolate and report on core academic study. This report's focus is on the total instructional program of the school). Non-instructional time describes time used for classroom management, preparation activities, transitions, lunch, or waiting and doing nothing.

Visits to Chicago schools provide vivid and compelling information about how time is used. We began visiting schools and classrooms on a regular basis in 1994 and continue to do so. Our efforts to visit classrooms on days when teachers and students were engaged in ongoing instruction (as opposed to taking a test, attending an assembly, etc.) served both as a signal and a steady reminder that time was precious and problematic. It is often difficult to schedule observations, and many were canceled due to special activities, schedule changes, and unforeseen circumstances.

In this report we use data from a three-year series of school and classroom observations conducted from 1994 to 1996. Across these years, we visited 15 Chicago Public Schools (eight elementary schools and seven high schools). The sampled schools reflected the most common student and community characteristics of the Chicago Public Schools. Specialty schools and magnet schools were not included.

A team of researchers repeatedly observed over 200 teachers to document over 1,000 periods of instruction in language arts, mathematics, and social studies in grades two, five, eight, nine, and ten. The size of this data base and the number of school visits it involved, allowed the research team to distinguish between incidental events and pervasive patterns.

Using observation logs, researchers recorded, coded, and timed classroom instruction as a series of activity segments.[3] A simplified series of activity segments during a math lesson might be: 1) taking attendance and checking in homework, 2) giving directions, 3) presenting students with information at the blackboard, 4) guiding students through examples, and 5) having students work on math problems at their seats. These records allowed us to group activity segments into instructional and non-instructional categories.[4] The non-instructional category captured time spent in administrative and management duties, directions and setup activities, transitions, and time waiting or doing nothing.

Additional sources of information on time in school were field notes and researcher meetings to discuss ongoing visits; analysis of weekly and monthly school calendars, official CPS schedules and documents; and multiple interviews with over 200 teachers and administrators.

We used these data to calculate actual time expenditures and to develop descriptive accounts of how time proceeds across blocks of the school year. It is important to note that these calculations reflect the hours of instruction CPS schools typically deliver to their students. This is fundamentally different from estimating the hours of instruction CPS students actually experience. For example, our figures do not include losses to instructional time brought about by individual student absence, tardiness, or class cutting—all recognized as serious problems in many CPS schools.[5] We also do not examine or calculate the impact of students' "off-task" behavior (not paying attention) or "unengaged behavior" (not applying oneself) on total learning time, although it is well established that students are off-task or unengaged at least some of the time.[6] Consequently, the figures reported here are inflated in terms of what individual CPS students experience or absorb, although how inflated would vary for each student.

# Time Basics

*Researcher: When might be a good time to see typical instruction in reading, writing, or math?*
*Teacher: Well, no time around here is really typical.*

The official time policy of the Chicago public elementary schools is to provide students with 300 minutes of instruction per day for 180 school days per year. This adds up to 900 hours of instruction annually. It is often acknowledged that the time actually spent on teaching and learning falls short of this, but how far short can be something of a shock. No single factor fuels or explains this loss of time. Rather, a mix of human and organizational concerns are at work here. Some factors are common to all schools, while others seem more particular to or troublesome in the CPS.

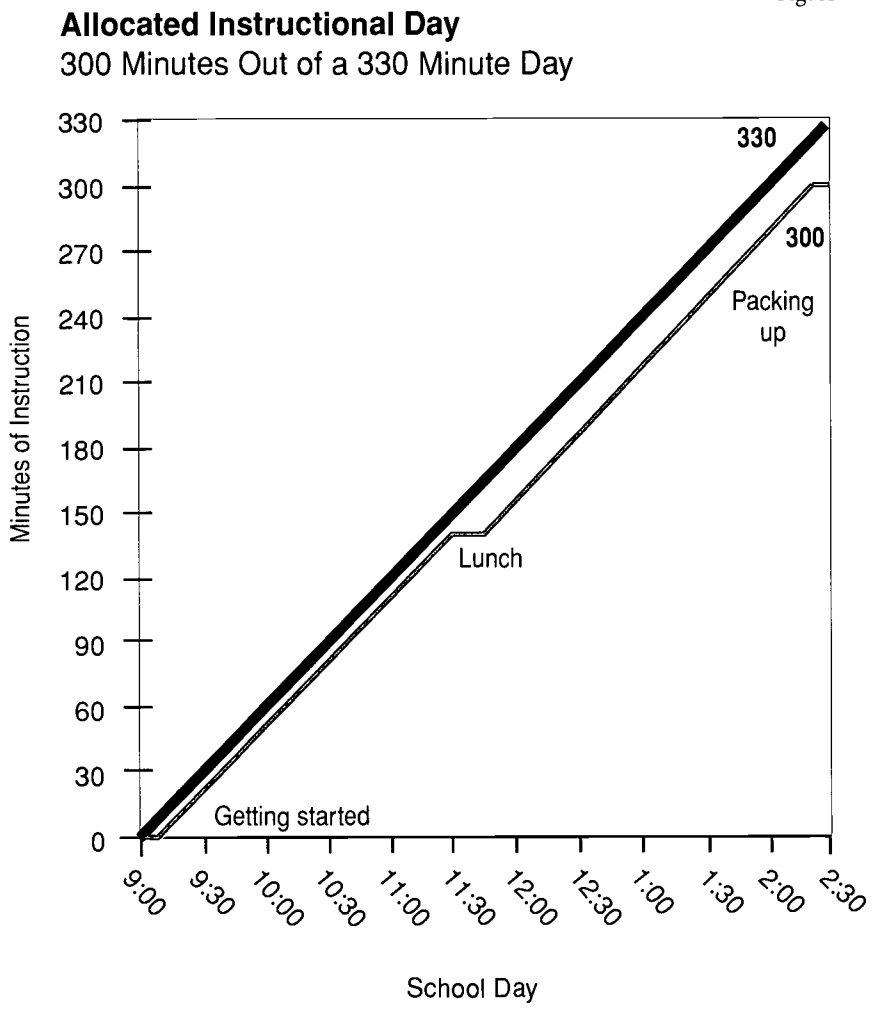
Illustrating how time unfolds across a typical school day is a useful starting point for recognizing the differences between how time is allocated and how it is actually spent. It also helps develop an understanding of the multilayered nature of the school time problem.

## The School Day and the Closed Campus Schedule

The majority of Chicago's 483 elementary schools operate on a schedule that is five and one-half hours or 330 minutes long. Distinct from the length of the total school day are the minutes of daily instruction. The CPS officially requires 300 minutes of general daily instruction, which encompasses language arts (reading, writing, and literature studies), math, social studies, science, art, music, health, physical education, library, and computers. For some students it also includes special reading programs or classes in English as a second language.

In comparison to many other districts around Illinois and the country as a whole, Chicago has a shorter day, both in terms of daily instruction and total time in school. It is more common for schools to operate 360-400 minutes daily in order to provide 330-360 minutes of instruction.[7] Because the CPS attempts to deliver 300 minutes of instruction during a 330-minute school day, it operates not only a short day, but also a highly compressed schedule. This means Chicago's largely disadvantaged schools are asked to make formidable achievement gains in less time than many of the more advantaged school systems around them.

Figure 1a




Chicago's school schedule is often referred to as "closed campus." Closed campus scheduling began in 1969 when parents and teachers became concerned with students' safety and behavior during the lunch hour. Up until this time, students either walked home for lunch or stayed at school and enjoyed lunch and recess. As fears for students' safety grew, however, many schools "closed" their campus and prohibited students from travelling home for lunch. Staff concerns about the extra work in monitoring student behavior and safety on the playground further prompted schools to end recess. As a result of both changes, the lunch hour was shortened to 20 minutes. The eliminated time was then subtracted from the end of students' school day. Instead of ending at 3:15 p.m., closed campus schools end at 2:30 p.m.

The schedule change triggered new problems. Few Chicago schools were designed to feed all the children in attendance. Finding ways to cycle all of their students through tiny lunchrooms became an administrative conundrum that continues to this day. In many schools, students simply ate lunch at their classroom desks. These changes and others caused teachers to lose their own lunch break. In response to this, closed campus schools moved the contracted 45 minutes for teachers' lunch to the end of the day.[8] This allowed teachers to leave school at the same time as their students, a provision that became widely popular. Very quickly, then, a schedule intended as a safety measure for schools in the most troubled neighborhoods of the city evolved into a CPS standard. Over 90 percent of Chicago's elementary schools continue to operate on this schedule.

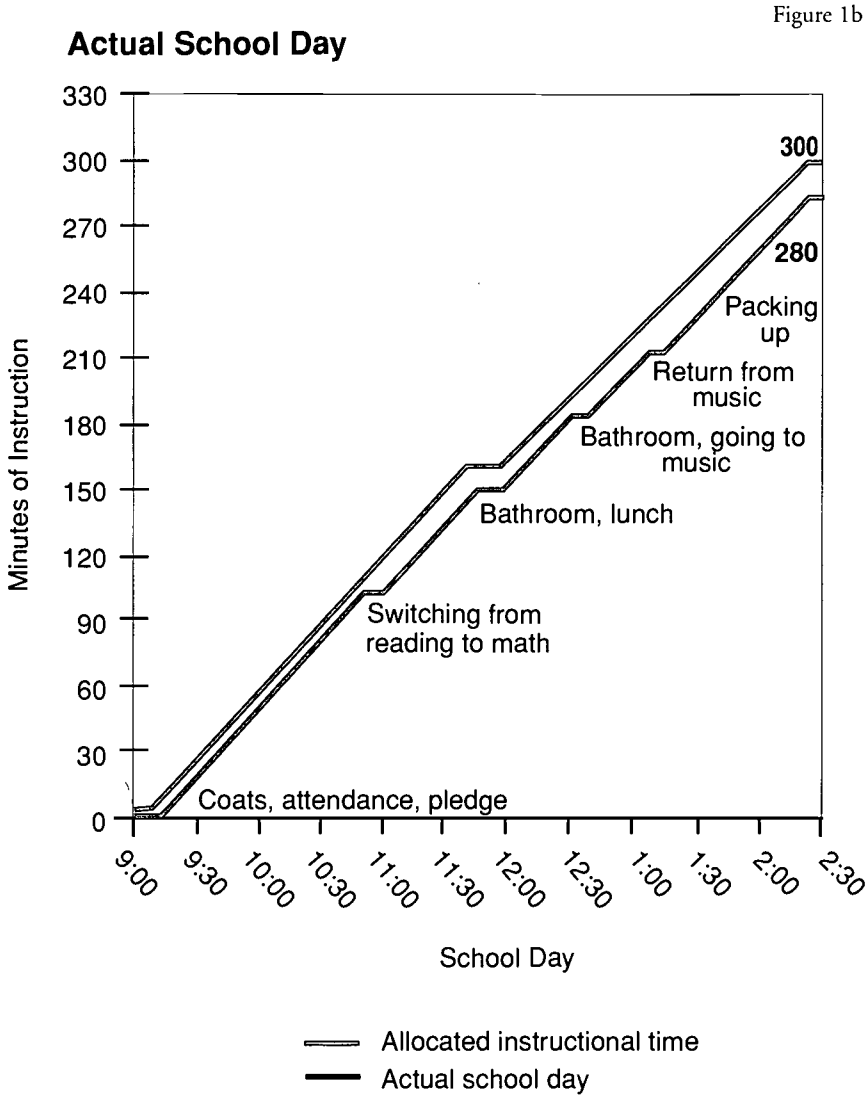
On paper, the 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. closed campus schedule exhibits all kinds of virtues and efficiencies. It devotes 90 percent of the school day to instruction. The closed campus schedule doesn't fritter away time on breaks, recess, open study periods, or other invitations to idleness or trouble. It doesn't even allow much time for gym or music or art. It also tries to dispense with all operational and logistical tasks in a mere 30 minutes. Schools typically begin their entrance routines before 9:00 so that students and teachers are in classrooms by that time. But teachers and students are still to complete attendance taking and announcements, lining up and passing from one class to the next, one to two bathroom breaks (when everybody marches down the hall together), a lunch

break, and all their exit routines, within 30 minutes.

*Ms. M has hall passing down to a science. When she turns off the classroom light, her second graders silently form two lines at the doorway. "It's always a big challenge to get all of them in and out of the bathroom, up two floors, and into the library in five minutes," she laughs. "I have to beat Ms. T's class to the bathroom in order to make it!"* [from a Year 3, second grade observation log].

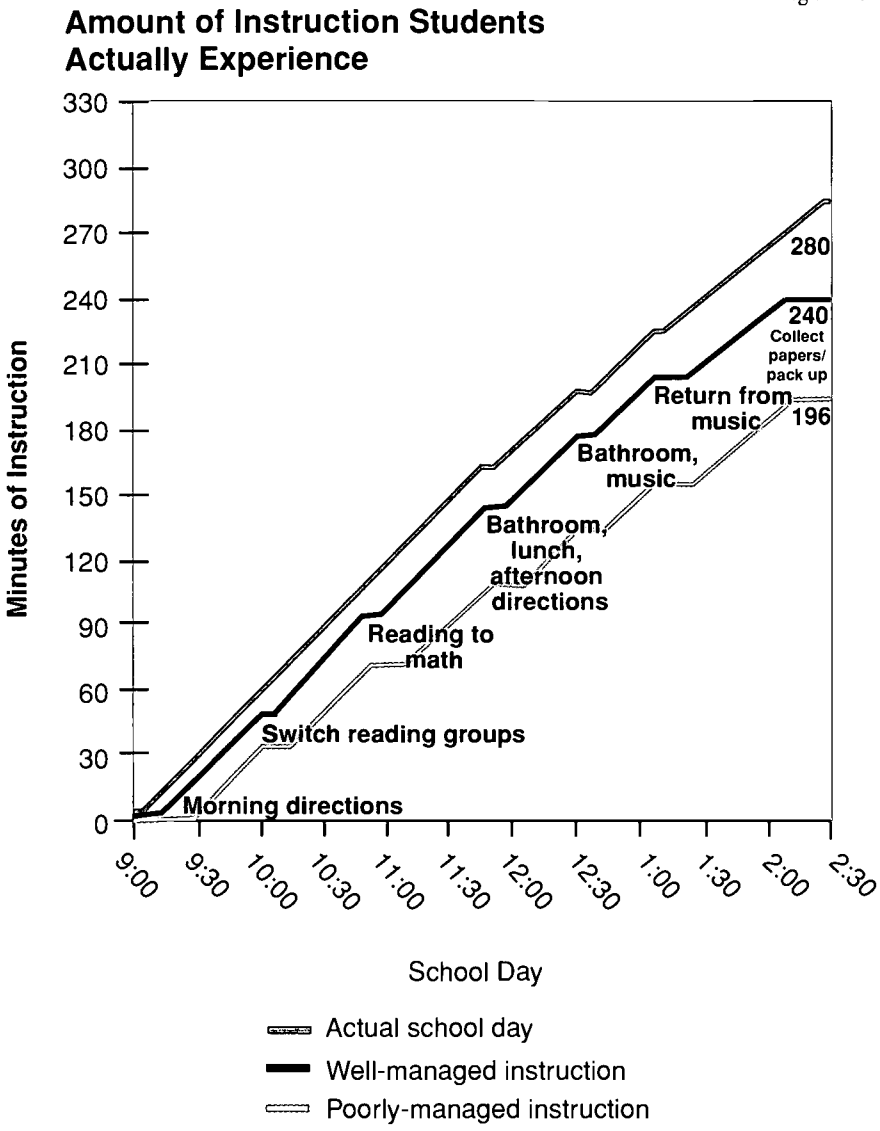
*9:00 a.m. Students are straggling in from the rain. As they enter, the teacher directs them to get out of their coats and to their desks. The kids chatter with one another as their classmates enter. At 9:15 a.m., after they stand to say the pledge of allegiance, the teacher begins to take attendance and to collect money from a candy sale. There is confusion about what has and has not been turned in yet. She then hands out some worksheets and ask students to get out their language arts books, but several students do not have their books. There is a short lecture about this and an emotional explanation from one upset student. Students move around to buddy up so everyone has a book. The attendance officer comes to collect paperwork. At 9:30 a.m., they settle in and begin work on a vocabulary assignment* [from a Year 2, fifth grade observation log].

Figure 1b




In truth, the closed campus schedule fronts a false economy. In an attempt to rid the school day of any recreational or slack time, the majority of CPS elementary schools operate on a timetable that is so compressed that the lives of young children and the demands of human nature are formally forsaken. Cut fingers, lost books, birthdays, wounded birds in shoeboxes, and squabbling do not officially exist in the CPS. In reality, children's needs and the demands of functioning as a civil group cannot be disregarded or compressed into 30 minutes. (Our observations suggest 50 minutes is a more realistic provision.) But because they are not provided for formally, these demands spill into time officially allotted to instruction. Thus, some portion of the instructional day is always consumed by these demands. We illustrate the significant difference between allocated and actual instructional time in Figures 1a and 1b.

Figure 1c




This flawed attemt at instructional efficiency is the first, and probably the most overarching reason why elementary schools fail to deliver 300 minutes of instruction daily. It is not surprising that most of Chicago's new charter schools have chosen to operate 60 to 90 minutes longer each day than the standard CPS school.

## The Schedule and Management of Core Instruction

The fundamental organizing unit of the elementary school day is the lesson or class period. Most class periods in elementary schools last 40 minutes. An important exception is the language arts period, which often lasts 90 minutes or longer. Elementary school teachers who work in self-contained classrooms have considerable control and flexibility in scheduling instructional periods because their students are not changing classrooms or teachers according to a timed bell. On certain days, they may lengthen one lesson and shorten or omit another. Teachers in grades one through three are the most likely to stretch their instructional units into longer, sustained periods because they devote most of the school day to elemental work in language arts and mathematics. Beyond these grades, few teachers and students have the opportunity to engage in lessons lasting longer than the 40-50 minute periods used to orchestrate class rotations in and out of the science room, music, gym, and so on. Thus, counter to how we think of young children's attention spans and abilities, primary grade children are actually more likely to experience sustained periods of academic work than their older brothers and sisters.

As observers of schools well know, only a portion of allocated instructional time is effectively spent teaching and learning. A myriad of small optional tasks and human needs intervene before lessons can actually begin. Even when teachers and students are assembled in their classrooms, general management tasks (getting books out, sharpening pencils, passing back papers, checking in on who did homework), and setup activities (getting into groups, giving and clarifying directions about what students will do next), consume precious time. These inevitable management demands push Chicago students farther away from 300 minutes of daily instruction and closer to 240 minutes (see Figure 1c).

## Previous Research on Instructional Time

Discussion of how much time American students spend in school has intensified over the last decade. For example, in 1994, the National Education Commission on Time and Learning released a major report, *Prisoners of Time*, on time use in American schools. They found that while American students often attend school longer each day than students in other nations, they often spend less school time in academic instruction. These differences are sometimes small in the early years of schooling, but grow substantially in middle school and high school. In response, the report advocates that all U.S. students receive at least 330 minutes of instruction daily. This would amount to a 10-20 percent increase over what is formally allocated for instruction in Chicago today.[9]

Previous to the Commission's report, research on instructional time had examined how instructional time affects students' achievement. Overall, this research affirms what common sense suggests: students who spend more time studying a subject have higher achievement than peers who are less exposed. Almost all of the research uses standardized test data as its measure of achievement; however, various studies employ distinctly different definitions of time. For example, international comparison studies, such as the recent Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) studied the officially allocated time students study a particular topic. These studies show a positive relationship between achievement and the number of hours, days, and years students are required to take instruction in a subject.[10]

Other studies narrow the definition of time to truly implemented or functional instructional time, the concept used in this report. Instructional time is the portion of the day teachers and students actually spend teaching and learning, as opposed to the time they spend taking attendance, getting organized, changing rooms, etc. These studies also show a positive relationship between instructional time and achievement, though there are different opinions on just how big and powerful the relationship is.[11] A review of this literature shows relationships between instructional time and achievement ranging from modest positive effects (instructional time explains 10 percent of the difference in students' achievement) to very substantial effects (instructional time explains up to 40 percent of the difference in students' achievement). Of importance to Chicago is the agreement that the largest and most powerful relationships between instructional time and learning are found in schools and classrooms serving disadvantaged and/or low performing students.[12]

Related studies have focused on students' time-on-task and engaged time. These studies take into account individual student behavior to calculate how much time students are psychologically engaged in instruction. They show a strong positive relationship between time and achievement. Students who spend more time-on-task, and who are more engaged in instruction, have higher achievement than those who apply themselves less. Also, classrooms that support more on-task time through skilled management and work ethics are more likely to have higher achievement than similarly situated classrooms that are less orderly and enterprising. Although a few studies suggest that there may be diminishing returns to extending the time given to a particular instructional activity (for example, vocabulary exercises), there is no evidence that increased instructional time leads to diminished student engagement. In fact, increased instructional time typically correlates with increased student engagement time.[13]

Some of the most complex studies on time and achievement examine the effects of academic learning time. This is the most carefully delimited conception of time in the literature. Academic learning time is the portion of time students are actively engaged in instruction that leads directly to demonstrated learning. It subtracts not only time spent on classroom management tasks, but also time spent on instructional activities that do not successfully translate into demonstrated learning on follow-up tests. These studies focus on teachers' skill in selecting and applying the most effective learning strategies and activities. Academic learning time studies find strong positive effects between instructional time and learning. Here, too, the strongest, most consistent effects have been with low performing, elementary school students.[14]

Overall, the literature strongly supports the conclusion that more instructional time well spent positively influences students' academic achievement.[15]

Many of the over 200 teachers we observed displayed professional skill and discipline at keeping such non-instructional time to a minimum. But many others appeared much less capable or committed. We observed many lessons with long settling-in routines, repeated directions, and multiple false starts. We also saw instructional time eroded by down time—periods when students were resting, hanging out, or waiting for someone or something. A minute or two of down time cannot always be avoided because lessons and learning can not be perfectly timed to the clock. But on many occasions, down time simply reflected low expectations for teacher productivity and student accomplishment.

*After students had settled into their seats and participated in the pledge of allegiance and national anthem during the morning announcements, it was 9:20 a.m. Mrs. H. began at this point to explain to her first grade students what the morning schedule would be. They would be coloring a "pizza" on a paper plate and writing an invitation to a party for their friends. They would be looking up definitions for science at a word center. Some would "read around the room" (pairs of students would walk around the room reading posters and other printed materials that were on the walls). These extended directions lasted until 9:40 a.m. Sporadic work began. Most children focused on the coloring activity.*

*At 10:00 a.m., six children went for small group instruction with a reading resource teacher. Mrs. H. pulled together her own small reading group at 10:20 a.m. Approximately half of the students remaining in the class were focused on the morning's assignments; others were talking to each other or coloring. At 10:40 a.m., the teacher called her second reading group and refocused other students who were off-task. This took another 10 minutes. The language arts block of her schedule ended at 11:00 a.m.*

*During the first two hours of the school day, 50 minutes were taken up by management and directions. Students' independent work varied considerably in their attention to the different assignments and in its quality. Focused reading instruction occurred in 20 minute segments for small groups of children. The actual time devoted to explicit teaching and student work ranged from slightly more than one hour to less than thirty minutes, depending on students' use of their time during independent tasks* [from a Year 3, first grade observation].

On average, the rate of non-instructional time (time spent in management tasks or time doing nothing) in the observed elementary school classrooms was 23 percent. This is somewhat higher than 18 percent average found in comparably designed observation studies.[16] This average reflects a broad range of individual teacher rates, however. We show a distribution of these rates in Figure 2.[17] From this distribution, we identify two groups of CPS teachers. Nearly half of the teachers spend 20 percent or less of their classroom time in non-instructional activities. These CPS teachers appear to manage their classrooms quite effectively. The average rate of non-instruction of these effective teachers is 14 percent. The other half of CPS teachers seem much less effective. They have a group average of 30 percent.

These differences in the organization and management of classrooms have a clear and measurable impact on the flow and accumulation of instructional time and opportunity. In Figure 1c we illustrate the difference between allocated time flow in a well-managed classroom, and time flow in a poorly managed classroom. This figure, together with our observations of how school day logistics spill into instructional time, are the basis for the assertion that Chicago students typically experience less than 240 minutes of general instruction.[18]

Upsetting figures such as these often lead to the response that "Schools should make better use of the time they have." Clearly, there is some truth to this for some teachers. Taken alone, however, this solution is too simplistic because it overlooks the fact that half of CPS teachers do manage time well. Such teachers demonstrated to us, however, that no matter how well they managed their day, they often lacked the time needed to provide effective instruction to their students. The good work of all these teachers is cut short by the current schedule.

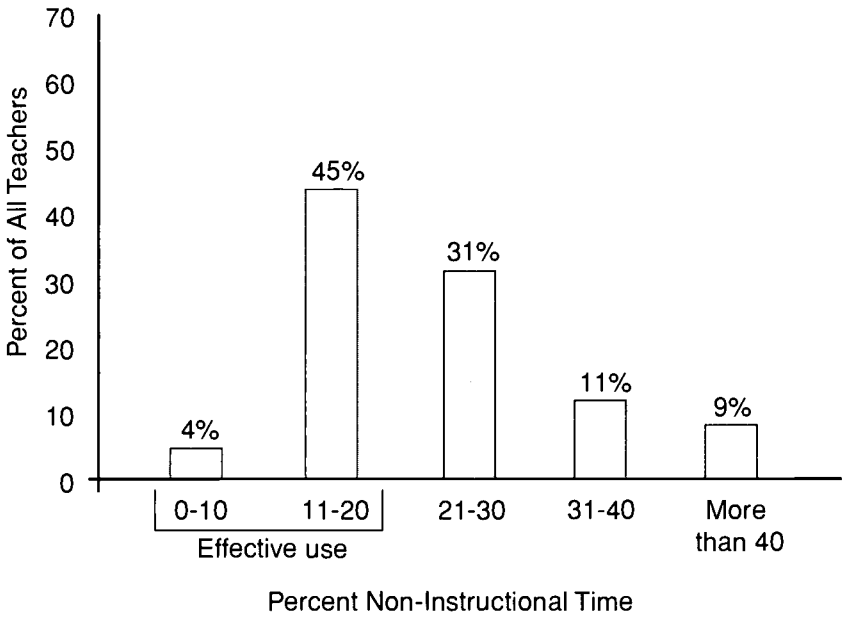
In short, there is a fundamental, overarching constraint on allocated time. The time losses of even the most poorly managed classrooms do not shape students' total instruc-

tional time nearly as much as the length and design of the school day. To be sure, there are margins for improvement in the classroom management skills of some teachers. The potential gains here, however, remain modest. Much larger gains reside in improvements in the structure of the basic schedule.

> *I stay after school almost every day but Friday. All my students know that I am here and that they can stay. They can work on whatever [they choose]. We can tutor, they can do homework, or anything they are interested in. I don't even care if it is something from outside school. Most of my students really need the extra time. When they go home, they don't have study space, and they just end up watching television. We've got kids running home to catch soap operas! Plus, I don't get nearly as much time to work with them during the regular day as I would like* [from a Year 2 teacher interview].

Figure 2

**Half the Teachers Use Their Time Effectively; Half Do Not**




Our data on how time is spent during a typical school day make plain that current time allocations do not well serve the district's goals. Even when we restrict our view to the most able schools and teachers observed, we have no evidence that 300 minutes of instruction can be delivered within a 330-minute school day. Teachers cannot cover schoolwide operational demands in 30 minutes, and they cannot deliver effective instruction without intermittent segments of class preparation and management. What is suggested by our findings is that a 300-minutes-a-day instructional program must be nested within a school day that is between 360 and 400 minutes long, depending on how lunch is organized and on whether the recess periods are restored.

## Time for Teacher Learning: The Other Time Problem

Researchers who study the relationships between instructional time and student achievement are quick to point out that skilled teaching is a critical part of the equation. Finding and creating time for teacher learning and staff development has been a priority reform, but progress has been limited. The work contract and teacher schedule is one reason.

Chicago teachers are contracted to work from 8:30 a.m.to 3:15 p.m. Technically, this has teachers arriving 15-30 minutes before their students and staying on about 30 minutes after they are all out the door. In practice, routines differ from school to school and from teacher to teacher. Some teachers work late, but many others, such as those with no other lunch break, leave at 2:30 p.m. In all cases, time for teacher learning and development is scarce and fragmented; there is no chunk of time set aside in the basic contract and school schedule for teachers to work together on a weekly basis.

*There just isn't any time to work on things together. The special education teacher and I are working on the inclusion plan for the whole school. We meet in the hallway. I mean, we will pass each other in the hall and say, "Okay, what is our next step?"* [from a Year 3 teacher interview].

Some individual schools have taken steps to provide teachers more opportunities to work together and collaborate. Many Chicago schools now redistribute some daily school time within the school week. One popular adjustment is to start the school day fifteen to thirty minutes early in order to have an early student release on one or more Fridays each month. The early release provides staffs with a 90-120 minute work block. These rearrangements, known as "flex time" or "restructured day," reflect the teachers' contract that stipulates teachers cannot work more than 33 hours per week. Recently, some parents and Local School Councils have become unhappy with the early release of their children and have voted to end these arrangements. Additionally, some faculties, equally unhappy with early releases, have chosen instead to work extra hours for additional pay. To do this, however, a school faculty must successfully vote to waive the work terms of the Chicago Teachers Union contract. Their school must have supplemental funds to pay for the added hours. Indeed, federal grants and private philanthropy fund much of the teacher development programming in the CPS.

The time constraints on teachers also bear heavily on the prospects for continued reform across the CPS. Growing bodies of research suggest that schools with effective instructional programs have strongly collaborative teacher work environments. Such schools involve their teachers in a professional community that collectively develops, coordinates, and assesses the effectiveness of instructional programs. Researchers have pointed out that teachers in European and Asian countries spend much more time than American teachers developing their instructional skills and crafting high quality lessons that they regularly analyze and discuss.[19] More locally, Consortium research has demonstrated that Chicago schools with high levels of teacher professional community have stronger academic climates, have more organized and coherent instructional programs, and are more likely to teach their students grade-level material. Professional community requires, however, the chunk of time that is missing from the standard work contract of teachers.[20]

Over the past decade, many in the Chicago community have sought to respond to teachers' need for shared time. Hundreds of schools are now involved in professional development partnerships and networks, an enormous transformation from the days when the Chicago schools were considered insular and unresponsive to calls for change. But the specialists now working with these schools are quickly learning what teachers already know—there isn't much time available. Severely limited opportunities to launch and sustain significant school development programs is the number one problem facing these partnerships.[21] As a consequence, some school reformers argue that the time constraints on teachers' work and learning are even more serious than those affecting students. Limits on the collective work time of teachers circumscribes the staff development needed to improve the quality of instruction. Thus, even if we increase instructional time for students, it may simply be more of the same modest quality teaching.

*Whenever the Chicago Annenberg Challenge partners discuss their plans, the first reaction from teachers is always, "We don't have time to learn, plan, and assist each other." Lack of adequate—even minimal—time is the number one barrier facing teachers who want to learn and improve their teaching. Until we can restructure a system that locks teachers into time constraints and [until we can] help teachers think about using their time effectively, we will continue to frustrate efforts to improve teaching in ways that lead to improved student achievement* [from Ken Rolling, Director, Chicago Annenberg Challenge].

## Good, Special, and Bad Days

> *There was a change in schedule, and our language arts observation was canceled because the students were taking a test. Mrs. T invited us to have coffee in the cafeteria, but we asked to stay in the classroom so we would be there when Mrs. L came to teach math. But then, we found out that Mrs. L had to go down to the Board, and a substitute was covering for her. Later, we went to see Ms. D teach math, but we found a sub in that classroom also. When we went to our next classroom, we found the kids visiting with a local policeman. Mrs. P's class ended up going to the computer lab, and Mrs. B's class wasn't even in the room. We threw up our hands and left. The day was a bust* [from Year 1 field notes].

The time losses embedded in daily classroom life illustrate only one form of lost time. An equally significant erosion of learning time results from the many school days affected by special activities and demands. Confronting this aspect of school life is another step to understanding the multilayered nature of time inside schools.

To depict this phenomenon, we can think of life in school as made up of "good," "special," and "bad" days. Good days proceed according to schedule and provide an opportunity to tackle meaningful work. During our in-depth studies, for example, we found that Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were typically viewed as good days. These good days are in serious short supply and often are squeezed out by the large number of special and bad days.

### Special Days

Special days are those with unusual activities that absorb time and interrupt the ongoing concentration and productivity of teachers and students for all or part of the day. Some special days affect the entire school while others affect only selected grades. Many special days reflect the expanded duties of schools to protect and nurture their students' health and safety, such as presentations on lead poisoning or visits from a local fireman.

Teachers frequently counseled us to not observe their classrooms on special days. Teachers often feel distracted and off-course on such days; they describe their students as wound up or, more affectionately, "nuts."

Figure 3

## Special Times for Springside School's Third Grade

Springside Elementary School was quite good about keeping a posted schedule of special events. The special days and events experienced by the third graders during 1994-1995 are listed below. This list accounts for the special days and events that are planned. Unexpected events, bad days, or slack days and the special days at the beginning and end of the year are not represented. Planned events affected 37 days of the school year.

| | |
|---|---|
| October 31 | Halloween parade |
| November 16 | Parent/Teacher day |
| November 23 | Field trip |
| November 28 | Student Council convention |
| December 1 | Hanukkah assembly |
| December 13 | Science fair |
| December 15 | Christmas assembly |
| December 23 | School Christmas party |
| January 13 | Assembly/dance |
| January 24 | Assembly |
| February 1 | Report card pick-up day |
| February 2 | Field trip |
| February 9 | Assembly |
| February 16 | Spelling bee |
| March 7 | Assembly |
| March 14 | IGAP testing |
| March 15 | IGAP testing |
| March 16 | IGAP testing |
| March 17 | IGAP testing |
| March 20 | Picture day |
| March 24 | Dental screening |
| April 4 | Book fair |
| April 5 | Parent/Teacher day |
| April 7 | Hearing and vision screening |
| April 25 | Assembly |
| April 27 | Assembly |
| April 28 | Assembly |
| May 2 | ITBS testing |
| May 3 | ITBS testing |
| May 4 | ITBS testing |
| May 5 | ITBS testing |
| May 16 | Assembly |
| May 17 | Walkathon |
| May 22 | Field trip |
| May 25 | Awards assembly |
| June 14 | Class party |
| June 20 | Report card pick-up day |

We had many observations canceled because teachers forgot that something special was scheduled. This led us to collect school bulletins to learn how often such events occur. In truth, we were not able to develop a fully accurate inventory of special events for each school because they were always changing and they were often not recorded. Figure 3 enumerates the special days experienced by the third graders of one of the elementary schools we visited, "Springside" (not its real name), which was well organized and kept good records.

Some special days have a positive air to them; they are shaped by energetic events that enrich the curriculum, such as field trips, guest speakers and artists, science and book fairs, career explorations, and celebrations of cultural and ethnic identity. Schools and teachers vary in their approach to such events. Some teachers link activities to classroom instruction, while others treat them as a break from the regular routine. Similarly, some teachers safeguard their teaching time, while others allow programs to seep into most of the morning or most of the day. All told, most students experience at least five such days each year.

*I am trying to learn Ms. S's teaching schedule. "Do you generally teach certain subjects at certain times of the day?" She responds that she tries to keep a schedule, but with assemblies and field trips and practicing for assemblies, there were lots of interruptions. I have not yet been to this school when something special*

*wasn't happening. I talked to an eighth grade teacher and a second grade teacher today trying to find actual classroom teaching and couldn't find any* [from Year 1 field notes].

An equal number of special days are earmarked to programs on important, life saving topics; for example, street safety, health and nutrition programs, anger and violence prevention, gangs, drugs, sex education, and AIDS awareness. These programs typically affect students' morning or afternoon on another four days.

The largest sources of special days are those dedicated to testing and parent communication activities. These include report card pick-up and parent conference days, final exam days, and all the days students take state-mandated achievement tests and district-mandated Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), and constitution tests. A growing number of schools now administer additional tests such as the California Achievement Test. These activities affect between eight and 12 days, depending on students' grade level and the number of tests given. Older students typically have more test days due to quarter and semester exams. On top of this is an increasing amount of time spent in preparing students to take these various tests (see sidebar, "Preparing for Standardized Tests").

Additionally, the days before and after these parent visitation and testing days are often disposed to various readiness and recovery activities: classroom cleanup, work folder organization, and pep talks the day before the tests; debriefing and "easier" activities such as distributing books and reading the day after. We tally six such days.

## Preparing for Standardized Tests: Another Slice Off Instructional Time

One factor taking a larger slice of class time each year is student preparation for standardized tests. In 1991, 44 percent of CPS elementary teachers indicated that they spent 12 or more hours of instructional time preparing students to take tests. In 1994, that figure rose to 47 percent, and in 1997 it rose again to 64 percent. In fact, by 1997 almost half of CPS elementary teachers reported spending more than 20 hours on this activity.[22] Moreover, our direct observations suggest that the survey categories for test preparation may not adequately capture its true growth, and that a new top category such as "50 or more hours" is now needed.

**Percent of Teachers Reporting 12 or More Hours on Test Preparation**


Figure 4

Learning to take standardized tests is an important skill that schools must teach, but an extended emphasis reduces the time for the study of new material.

*It's the end of the quarter. For the first five minutes of class, students take a multiple-choice quiz. The quiz helps students with low grade point averages raise them before their report cards are issued. The class spent the rest of the period putting together their work portfolios. Each student unloaded a pile of papers, worksheets, and assignments onto their desk. They had a checklist of everything that should be in their portfolio. When they had them in order, they went one by one up to Ms. G's desk to review the portfolio. [Another researcher] had a similar experience in another school earlier this week. We are learning that the days at the end of the quarter are not a good time for observing instruction* [from Year 1 observations and meeting notes].

Some days are special because it has somehow been decided that they are. Almost all classrooms (or adult workplaces for that manner) indulge in a bit of this, but 15 to 20 percent of the classrooms we visited seemed riddled with special days. These losses are another manifestation of weak management and work ethics. For example, some teachers and students have bargains that declare Fridays as special; they forgo substantive instruction in favor of shortened lessons, playing quasi-educational games, watching videos, taking a "mental health break," or other less than academic pursuits. Some teachers employ an opposite strategy entirely, using Fridays as a high-stakes testing day. Either way, a majority of teachers asked us not to visit them on Fridays. Calculating an average for these days is difficult because approximately 40 different Fridays come into play. To be fair to all the hard working teachers and students, we use a conservative figure of four days to estimate the instructional cost of these bargains.

*It's "Reading Friday." (The class always reads aloud on Fridays.) Mrs. P tells students to open their anthologies to a story by Langston Hughes. "Mrs. P, we read this last month," says a student. "No we didn't," she replies. "Yes we did!" respond several students. "Well, then, we'll just read it again!" says Mrs. P. They begin to read the story, but mention of a New York nightclub sidetracks them into a long conversation about the differences between nightclubs and television. This conversation pretty much eats up the rest of the period. Passing the time seems the main goal today* [from a Year 1, eighth grade observation].

*It's an easy afternoon today in Ms. D's class, and they don't do any math. "The kids had a test yesterday, and they got a big lecture on some of their behavior. I told them if they were good this morning, they could work on their report covers after lunch," she explains. For the rest of the observation, kids cut out figures of animals and color them* [from a Year 3, eighth grade observation].

The days or week before Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring break, and other holidays are similarly treated as special. Attendance declines for both students and teachers during these periods. The school system's Substitute Center receives the largest request for substitutes (over 1,500 each day, up from an average of around 1,200) for the days before holiday breaks.[23] Indeed, during the past year, the school system canceled school on Good Friday and July 5 because so many teachers filed for substitutes that the central office feared it could not staff the schools. Not surprisingly, we were frequently told that it would not be worth our while to observe classes the week before a major vacation. We were told by some teachers that "nothing is going on here all week." We can add another six days to our tally to reflect these holiday slowdowns.

This brings our conservative tally of the number of special days to 35, which approaches one-fifth of the school year. Depending on the habits of their teachers and their school, some students may have up to twice this number. Reductions in instructional time on these days range anywhere from 20 to 100 percent.

Clearly, there are differences in the value of these different special days. Some serve the instructional programs of the schools by exposing students to a wider world and by providing alternative ways to study core subjects. Skillfully integrated, such days can refresh and renew teachers' and students' energy for work and progress. The point to listing them here is not to suggest that they are

a waste of time. Instead we simply wish to show how these events combine with others to absorb limited instructional time, and to illustrate the fact that life in CPS


classrooms is nothing like the steady flow of academic lessons we all like to imagine. More accurately, it is a series of stop-and-go learning opportunities that compete with one another for scarce time.

In our view, one-third or more of these special days do not serve important educational purposes. They point out times and places where learning opportunity is neglected. These time losses are distinct from the daily erosions described earlier or the special days that serve important educational objectives. They are not about insufficient time or rushed and unrealistic scheduling. They are about cycles of organizational slack and low expectations for teaching and learning. When, in many of the schools we visited, certain days were predictably treated as less important and productive, we saw widespread dips in instructional activity. In turn, absences often rose and the press for substantive work declined, a pattern that simply reinforced absence. Administrators, teachers, students, and their parents all play a part in sustaining these negative cycles.

This accounting of special days does not yet include an even larger source of weakened instructional time: the weeks at the beginning and end of the school year. We will discuss these shortly, but first we acknowledge another very real source of lost instructional time in the CPS—bad days.

## Bad Days

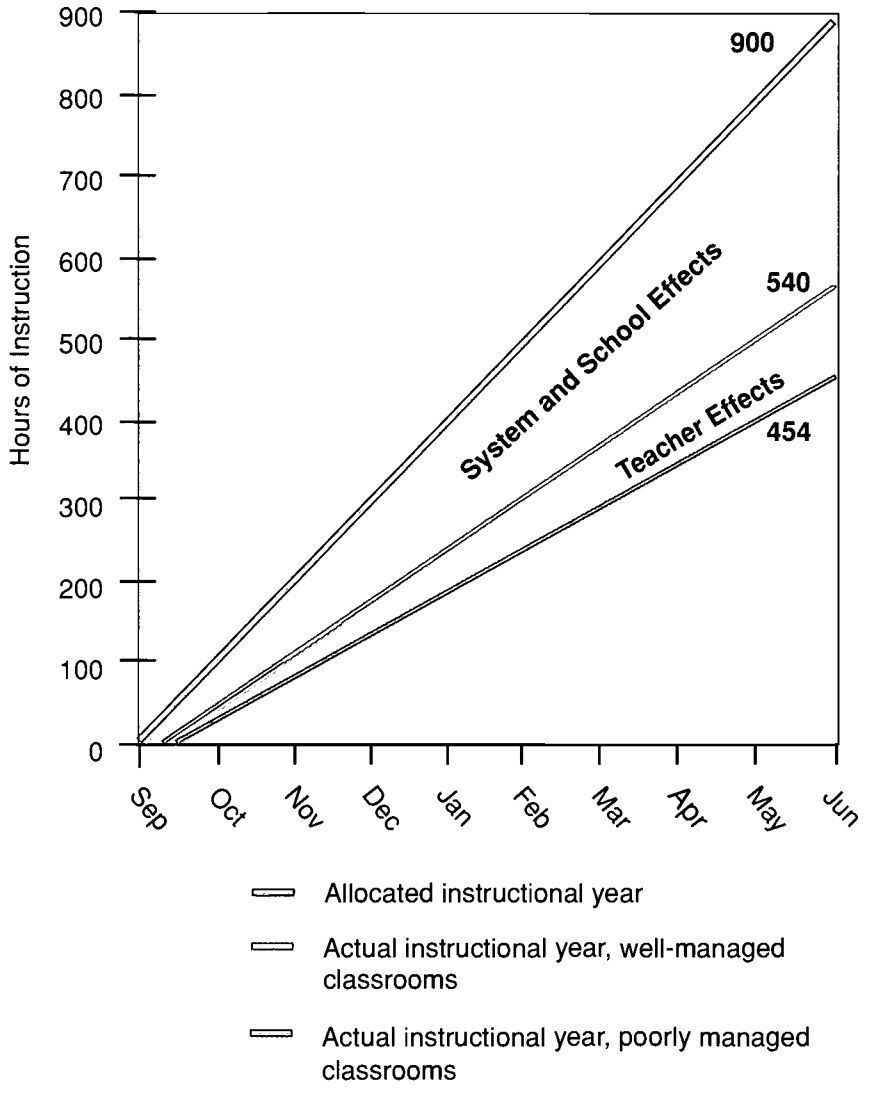
Bad school days transpire when unplanned and unwanted events occur in the building or in the school's community. Many are part of life and cannot be avoided, though we all hope to escape them. Like special days, bad days tend to rob teachers and students of their concentration and their academic focus. Some have the added sting of sapping their morale and energy. Across the school year, in addition to all their special days, most teachers and students will experience a handful of bad days. There are several types.

For students, the most common type of bad day (educationally speaking) is when they have an ineffective substitute teacher or no teacher at all. Reports of substitute shortages in urban schools and our own observations, strongly suggest that most of the day is instructionally idled when there is a substitute.[24] On a typical day, the Substitute Center at the Chicago Board of Education receives requests for between 1,200 and 1,400 substitute teachers (about 6 percent of the teachers assigned to classrooms). This means that on any given day, tens of thousands of Chicago students are, academically speaking, having a bad day.

Many bad days in the CPS are also caused by physical plant calamities such as plumbing breakdowns, roof and window leakage, or loss of electricity or heat. A much welcomed school renovation campaign should diminish the number of these bad days in the near future. In the meantime, however, the renovations

## Schools' Instructional Time Is about Half of the CPS Goal

Figure 5




themselves are disruptive, as they force teachers and students to set up class in hallways, basements, and gymnasiums to escape the noise, dust, and fumes of tuck-pointers, asbestos removers, window replacement teams, and the like.

*I just observed a lesson that was so disrupted by tuck-pointers blasting away on the other side of the wall that I couldn't hear a thing. The teacher was thrilled to have me there as a witness. "See what they make us teach in!" Later, I talked to several teachers about this problem. "I have had that drilling for one whole month," one explains. Another adds, "Yes, when it was in my room, the kids were getting sick from all the dust. The room was covered in soot. Then I had to get out of the room so they could paint it."*

*"They paint in the middle of the school year?" I ask.*

*"All the time. Two years ago I was out of the room for a whole month. We had class in the auditorium with the band! I'm not kidding! When I got back, half my stuff was missing."* [from Year 3].

Every so often a school day is upended by disruptions: fire alarms when there is no fire, smoke bombs, student fights, school vandalism, or other problems. Such incidents seemed, in our experience, no more common in Chicago's elementary schools than others, but they were a terrible problem in several of the high schools visited.

The most difficult kind of bad day occurs when personal tragedy befalls teachers, students, or their families. CPS communities manifest more vibrant life and goodness than ever acknowledged, but they also suffer a relentless number of crises.[25] None of the schools we studied escaped the tragedies of contemporary urban life. We witnessed the lives of teachers, students, and staff cut short by heart attacks, arson, and, most horrible of all, murder. Thousands of Chicago children suffer severe, life-threatening asthma attacks while at school. On top of the ongoing strains of unemployment, ill health, and family dislocation and dissolution, teachers and students waded through school and community scandals, gang activity, and housing upheavals. But what is often overlooked

is the central role schools have in responding to these tragedies. Contrary to public images of urban schools as places of violence or misfortune, they are experienced by students and their families as centers for help and healing. Schools cannot, as many may hope, operate as sealed off oases that deny the troubles around them and just plow efficiently onward. The random shocks of urban life make their way to school in the hearts and minds of students. When they do, Chicago teachers must stop what they are doing and respond. Sometimes the response is brief, such as forgoing one lesson to discuss something that has happened. Other times it is more extended, such as assemblies of the whole school community or visits with special counselors. It need not always be the case that teachers and students forgo all attempts at teaching and learning when bad things happen (which we saw some of them do). It does mean, however, that what could have been a good day, when all can peacefully put their mind to the task at hand, was stolen away.

> *Today we are not able to visit classrooms as scheduled. A terrible fire in a nearby building has killed two of the school's students and wounded several others. Many school families are now homeless and without any belongings. All kinds of parents and neighbors are in the school. It is both a sad and inspirational sight. The school has already started collecting clothes and other items for the victims. It's simply not a day to learn about typical instruction* [from Year 3 field notes].

Just as our observations of life in classrooms taught us the true content of the school day, our repeated visits to schools taught us the true makeup of the school week and year. Many of the special and bad days that pepper the annual calendar are, like cut fingers and lost folders, a part of life that cannot be erased. As parents and caring adults, we want our students roundly educated and protected from the dangers of modern life. But we don't acknowledge these demands when we plan and schedule the school's calendar. We pretend that an age-old schedule is absorbing the modern world without any effect on the continuous progression of instruction.

This blind spot is another factor in why the instructional time actually experienced by Chicago students is only 40 to 60 percent of what official policy commands. To illustrate this, we return to Springside School (the strongest elementary school we visited) and chart the use of time across the school year. We began with the daily time flow in a very well-managed classroom. We then subtracted all the special days at Springside (see Figure 3, page 14), plus a small set of special days for the first and last week of school. This best case scenario suggests that students received about 540 hours of instruction (see Figure 5).

For comparison purposes, we also calculate the experiences of students who attend classrooms that are not well managed (with a 30 percent level of non-instruction and with 10 percent more lost time for special days and a few bad days across the school year). Such Chicago students receive about half the recommended hours of instruction. Based on our field study observation, we estimate that nearly half of Chicago students might fall into this category.

# Good, Special, and Bad School Weeks

Some special and bad days arrive without warning or notice. Many others predictably cluster into what essentially become good, special, or bad weeks. For example, just as most Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays are tacitly understood and used as "good" school days, certain weeks are also considered good. In the experience of the teachers we observed and interviewed, there are two good periods for their most important and challenging instructional work: the seven weeks between October 1 and November 20, and the six weeks from approximately January 15 to March 1. In a 40-week school year, this adds up to 13 weeks of schooling that is reliably and continuously focused on teaching the grade-level curriculum outlined by the district and state. To be sure, other weeks have good days, but they are disconnected by the special and bad days described above, and by the special weeks that mark the school year cycle. A brief tour across this calendar explains how the erosion of teaching occurs and results in seriously reduced opportunities for student learning.

## Leveling

At the start of the school year, teachers and students arrive with great hopes and expectations. How their school year commences depends on a number of key factors. These include how stable the school's student enrollment is, how well organized and scheduled the school's program is, how stable its leadership and staff are, and how final its budget is. In many Chicago schools, sizable student registration and enrollment fluctuations trigger last minute budget changes, which in turn alter the number of teachers schools may hire, and so on. As a result, returning teachers arrive prepared to teach one grade or subject and find themselves assigned to another. Or, new teachers work one week, then are let go when their position funding is eliminated, only to be called back three weeks later when it is retrieved. In response, students are shifted in and around classrooms. Sometimes central office decisions made during the summer send schools scrambling to reorganize and restaff their programs. This process of keeping the number of teachers hired by a school aligned with student enrollment, classroom size regulations, and the school's overall program organization is referred to as "leveling." Leveling often leads to school starts that are marked by a

sense of impending havoc. Teachers caught in these circumstances may well wonder how much work to begin if major changes will mean starting all over again.

> *The day before the first day of school, teachers are working to get everything ready. During a lunch time staff meeting, they are told that the school has not found a librarian, so they will need to cover these periods in their own classrooms. At the end of the meeting, three teachers stare in dismay at pieces of paper in their hands. One teacher has received notice that she will move from second grade to sixth grade. Another has been told she will now teach a split third- and fourth-grade classroom; the third teacher has been asked to move to a classroom on a different floor. They have half a day to make these changes* [from Year 3 field notes].

A serious effort underway by the current system administration to boost early school registration should reduce the commotion caused by leveling. In a 1997 Consortium survey of CPS elementary teachers, 58 percent of the respondents reported that they were able to get their classes into full swing in two weeks. But 42 percent of the teachers still reported that it was 3 weeks or longer before they could do the same.[26] Given that September is one of the few months of the year that is free of holidays and other breaks, the productivity of the first weeks of school is extremely valuable.

Even in schools that enjoy a smooth start, the work that occurs in classrooms for the first month of school has its own special qualities and characteristics. Time is needed to initiate students into school and classroom rules and routines. Students need opportunities to learn about each other and their new teachers. All of these activities together shape the month of September.

October marks the onset of the substantive academic year for many schools and classrooms. Even though Columbus Day, report card pick-up day, Halloween, and one or two health and safety events typically occur during the next six to seven weeks, this time period presents one of the most focused and uninterrupted instructional segments of the CPS school year. As Thanksgiving approaches, however, the tone of the schools often seems to alter. In our visits, teachers spoke of increasingly restless students and everyone's need for a break. Thanksgiving week typically has some special activities or a special Wednesday.

On return from the Thanksgiving holiday, there is a short perk-up, but the Christmas break is soon in the air. Student attendance begins to dip, and requests for substitute teachers begin to climb. During the three years of our visits, this also seemed one of the most common periods for disruptive student behavior

and bad school days. Soon, it is the week before the Christmas break. More often then not, this week is a grab bag of special days and activities.

When teachers and students return from Christmas break, they settle in to complete first semester projects. There is a spate of exams and special semester transition activities. This period is also a common time to have schoolwide heritage celebrations and events to honor Dr. Martin Luther King.

Once the second semester begins at the end of January, there is another fairly steady and productive period of teaching and learning. This period from February to early March is not, however, as stable as October because it is cut up by a streak of four-day school weeks due to Lincoln's birthday, Presidents' Day, and Casimir Pulaski Day, a sequence peculiar to Chicago that many have unsuccessfully lobbied to end.

As March approaches and begins, the instructional emphasis of many schools shifts heavily to standardized test preparation, which continues into the spring. The timing depends on when the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the state mandated achievement tests are scheduled—the earlier the tests, the earlier the preparations. Teachers typically begin reviewing all the basic knowledge and skills they expect to be on the tests. They often dip back into curriculum from earlier years to refresh and bolster students' memory and skills. Students often spend a considerable chunk of their day working in test preparation workbooks and taking practice tests. They are often moved back into single row seating to get comfortable with how they will sit during the tests.

> *We are not visiting our schools much because it is what we have come to call "the testing season." The elementary teachers seem the most stressed. "This simply isn't a good time," they tell us. They are working hard, but they describe their work as something other than regular teaching. Many classes consist of practice tests. The students practice reading instructions and timing their work. They sit in rows and they start, stop, and turn their papers over on command, just as they will during the actual tests. However, these are not the classes our teachers want recorded* [from Year 2 field and meeting notes].

This transition, "the testing season," marks the beginning of the most frayed period of the school year. Indeed, in many respects, it signals the beginning of the end. The time spent preparing students for standardized tests is not without academic merit, but it frequently means that the teaching and learning of new material and skills slows or comes to a stop for weeks, even months, at a time. Other events combine with the tests to continue this slowdown. Amid the tests comes the annual spring break and the special days that tag onto it. Another round of quarter tests and report card pick-up days occurs. Spring is also the most common period for field trips, plays, science or book fairs, and guest visitors. In sum, even though 12-15 weeks (about one-third) of the school year remains, many classrooms never regain the forward pace of teaching and learning they managed in the fall. In fact, half (or 49.2 percent) of the elementary teachers surveyed in 1997 reported that they spend less than 50 percent of all class time during the months of April, May, and June on the introduction and study of new material.[27]

Moreover, as the use of the ITBS tests to determine students' grade passage and school accountability has grown, the purpose of all the school days that follow the tests have become increasingly vague. With the ultimate performance measure taken, the weeks that follow can seem like one big extra credit assignment. In the official school schedule, May and June actually present the longest string of continuous school weeks in the year. But, in the enacted schedule, the number of good days plummets and the number of special days soars. Indeed, this period may constitute the largest single source of special school days across the calendar. Admittedly, this post-test period often restores some needed calm and pleasantness to school life. There are videos and plays and award ceremonies and assemblies and numerous rehearsals—all the activities that are anxiously sworn off during the testing season. But less and less time is given to new academic subject matter and new skills. Ironically, this six-week period is as long as the summer academic programs that in 1998 enrolled almost 100,000 CPS students.[28]

## Springside Elementary School Calendar

How a School Year Is Actually Spent

**September 1994**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| 5 | (6) | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

**October 1994**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10 | 11 | (12) | 13 | 14 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 31 | | | | |

**November 1994**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
| 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| 28 | 29 | 30 | | |

**December 1994**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

**January 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | (27) |
| 30 | 31 | | | |

**February 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| 20 | 21 | (22) | 23 | 24 |
| 27 | 28 | | | |

**March 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 |

**April 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| | | | | |

**May 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 |
| 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 |
| 29 | 30 | 31 | | |

**June 1995**

| Mon. | Tues. | Wed. | Thurs. | Fri. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| (19) | 20 | (21) | | |

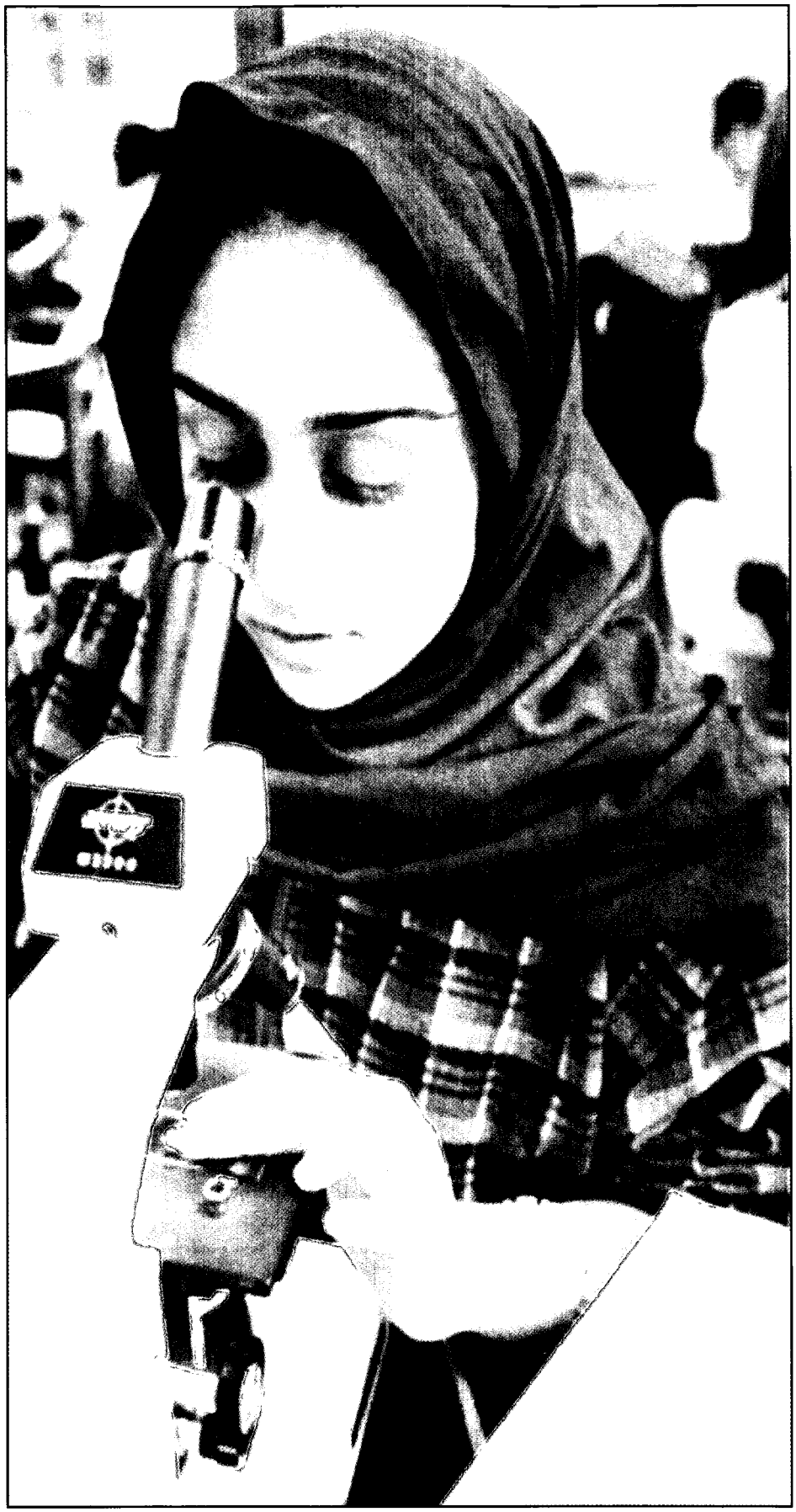
- Holiday (no classes)
- Holiday event
- Special events and assemblies
- Testing
- Test motivation/preparation
- Starting up preparations/end of year drop off
- ( ) Teacher Institute Day (no classes) or half-day in-service days
- Report card pick-up or parent/teacher day

*Note:* White indicates full days available for instruction. Specific event dates used here are from the 1994-1995 academic year. The overall pattern illustrated, however, remains common today.

*It is the third week of May. Scheduling observations is becoming very difficult. Every day seems to be special for one reason or another. Some of the classes are doing interesting work, but a pattern of ongoing math, reading, and writing lessons seems to be disappearing. There is a sense in the school that the academic year is over. The eighth grade has given up teaching entirely, in favor of graduation rehearsals* [from Year 2 field and meeting notes].

To review this summary tour of the school year, then, it was estimated that there are 10 or more school days at the start of the school year before most teachers and students embark on grade-level curriculum. At the end of the school year, there are as many as 30 special days where the academic productivity of the schools is severely slowed and diminished. Between these periods, teachers and students also experience over 30 additional special and bad days. To be fair and moderate, we stated at the beginning that most students experience about 125 school days focused on grade-level instruction each year. (Indeed, this is actually 10 percent more than what is suggested by our conservative calculations.) These numbers may overstate disruptions and time losses inside Chicago's most effective and successful schools, but they are generous for the majority of schools we visited and, we suspect, the majority of Chicago schools in general.

The overall effect of these various factors can be most vividly seen in the annual calendar for "Springside School" presented in Figure 6. The days, and parts of days, lost for various reasons are all marked off. The "white spaces" in this calendar are the sustained blocks of time available for the introduction of new subject matter. Clearly, once we move out of the fall and early winter, not much of this exists throughout the rest of the academic year.



## Interpretive Summary

The lack of adequate instructional time is tacitly acknowledged by many but has been left unaddressed by stalemated debates. Arguments and evidence that schools do not have sufficient time to meet the demands placed on them are countered by admonitions that educators should be more efficient in their use of time.

Our work attests that there is validity to both perspectives. The analyses presented demonstrate that the problem of "not enough time" is a cumulative result of a myriad of issues, each of which requires a distinctive redress. Moreover, we are convinced that unless the CPS takes seriously its goal of providing all students with 300 daily minutes and 900 annual hours of instruction, major improvements in student learning will continue to elude us. A true solution will require coordinated efforts that cut across all levels of the system by classroom teachers, school administrators, and system leaders.

### Improve Management through Professional Development

Schools and classrooms are complex units with many parts that must be coordinated. Students need to be on time to school and to the gym or lunchroom. Indeed, a common characteristic of effective schools is their respect for time and scheduling.[29] So, a first principle of improving school productivity is competent time management.

Weak management on the part of administrators and teachers can reflect limited skill, poor judgment, and/or low expectations and standards for teaching and learning. It can also signal vague purposes and goals; time doesn't much matter when you are not sure what you are trying to achieve. Currently, there is little guidance and professional development for school administrators and teachers on improving school management. Little is done to assess who is and is not managing time well. When help does arrive, it is often inadequate.[30]

In the case of teachers, the most promising strategies are not isolated workshops on time management but rather integrated programs of teacher development within the larger context of a school-based professional community. As documented in a growing body of research, including studies conducted by the Consortium, professional community involves teachers

in ongoing dialogue about teaching, learning, and school goals. It encourages teachers to collectively develop, monitor, and improve their core instructional program and the standards that guide their work. In a strong professional community, teachers are more likely to share values and beliefs about their collective responsibility for student learning and for the operation of their school. Previous research in Chicago has demonstrated that schools with strong professional community have stronger academic climates, more grade level instruction, and greater success at long-term school improvement.[31]

The dynamics and benefits of teachers' professional community are far reaching. Professional community can help teachers hone their individual and collective management skills through shared practice and mentoring that is substantive, local, and ongoing. It can shape and enforce organizational norms where instructional time is considered sacred and inviolate. Just as important, the instructional goals developed through professional community can reduce the uncertainties that erode teachers' confidence and sense of purpose. Teachers who are invested in a shared set of challenging learning activities and goals are not confused or careless about how to use instructional time. Just the opposite, they seize upon it.

## Rethink the School Day

We have noted that the daily instructional schedule is the overarching determinant of students' total learning time. It affects every teacher and student, and every day of the school year. We have also documented how, even in the most well-managed schools and classrooms, Chicago teachers cannot provide 300 minutes of daily instruction within a 330-minute day. To deliver quality

## How Lighthouse Programs Help

In recent years, the CPS has invested heavily in after-school programs that extend instructional time. In addition, local schools spend discretionary funds—state chapter 1—for extended instructional time. In this sense, thousands of Chicago children are already being provided with more instructional time.

One of the largest endeavors in this regard is the new Lighthouse program, which funds added learning and recreation time in over 300 low-performing Chicago elementary schools. The number of students enrolled, and the number of hours and days funded, differs from school to school. The most extensive Lighthouse programs schedule students to be in school from 9:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. These are time feasts amid the more general time famine.

Lighthouse and other similar programs do increase students' instructional time, but they resolve few of the problems outlined in this report because they function as add-ons to the school day. For example, they do not secure more focused and sustained periods of instructional time because they operate separately from the "regular" school day, often with a different curriculum and different staff. As a result, students attending Lighthouse programs may not be practicing the math skills learned in class that day or improving an essay they produced earlier that week. Instead, they may be covering entirely different material.

More generally, Lighthouse programs, and the numerous voluntary tutorial programs schools sponsor, are not designed to improve the effectiveness of schools as organizations. Programs such as these focus on students' needs for extra attention and learning time, but they sidestep administrator and teacher obligations to improve the core school program, to develop their own skills and standards, or to rethink the school schedule and calendar to the benefit of everyone. In fact, by making schools more complex organizations to administer, more operational problems may emerge.

To be sure, Lighthouse programs are providing valuable assistance to thousands of CPS students. But we should not expect such programs to solve the time problems that are embedded in the structure and traditions of the typical school day and the annual school year.

instructional time, teachers must have some non-instructional buffer zone that absorbs the logistical/managerial demands of school life, and the personal and social needs of children. Our observation of skilled teachers indicates that 20-25 percent of the total school day must be seen as serving this function. Thus, to secure 300 minutes of instruction, the school day needs to be 360-400 minutes long.

The current schedule imposes equally serious time constraints on teachers' learning. Indeed, having just noted the importance of teachers' professional community, we are faced with the fact that teachers' work schedules do not allow an opportunity for teachers to engage collectively in meaningful classroom and school improvement activity.

In short, our analyses lead to the conclusion that the basic school days need to be longer, and that teachers' regular working hours must extend beyond those of their students. Teachers should be provided with a sensible lunch break rather than an early exit option. A growing number of CPS schools have struggled to adopt such changes on their own. This is a place where the district must lead rather than follow.


## Alter the Timing of Key Events

The CPS has already undertaken many steps to restore time to the annual school calendar. Many students are registering early so that schools can follow through on staffing assignments and secure stronger start-ups and more productive Septembers. To further these improvements, the central office and the teachers' union might bargain to bring teachers back to school earlier to assure that they are truly in place and prepared to start on the first day of school.

The CPS's building renovation campaign is desperately needed and deeply appreciated. With hundreds of millions of dollars in hand, however, the CPS should push contractors to work outside of the school day and year as much as possible. It is difficult for teachers and students to achieve much if workers are sandblasting the schoolhouse walls for days on end.

Valuable learning time can also be recaptured if teachers, administrators, and leaders in the central office rethink special events and special days. To begin, teachers can be more purposeful in their approach to special events such as field trips, assemblies, guest speakers, and health and safety presentations. They should enjoy the break in the regular routine such events provide, but they can also link them to substantive learning processes and products.

Teachers and schools must restore a better balance to their good and special days. School should be a fun and happy place where holidays and celebrations are enjoyed. But this is different from allowing entire days and weeks to descend into a hodgepodge of activities. Rather than

relinquishing certain times of the school year to lowered expectations for academic work, schools should instead look to bolster the energy and esteem of teachers and students as they near the end of the quarter or approach a needed holiday.

Next, district and school administrators should pay closer attention to the schedule of special events and holidays in order to create more blocks of continuous learning time. The special day surges that now attenuate entire months and quarters of the school year are preventable.

Last, and very important, the school system should work with the Illinois State Board of Education to reconsider its schedule of high-stakes testing. The demands of two standardized testing systems each year consume an enormous chunk of valuable learning time. Couldn't we forge one integrated accountability system? In addition, significant improvements in the processing, scoring, and turnaround of test results now mean that schools can administer tests two to three weeks before the end of the year. Moving the administration of these tests toward the true end of the school year could revive an end-of-year work ethic and restore as much as 20 percent of the annual instructional time to teachers and students.

Taking seriously the problems of time may be one of the most powerful "basics" the school system and the community can now support. The CPS is looking at one of the most challenging periods of reform ever. We have moved beyond rock bottom and are making good progress in raising basic skills scores. The task ahead is meaningful improvement toward the CPS's learning standards and toward high quality intellectual work for all students. Lined up to assist is a growing network of school development partnerships, new leadership training institutes for Chicago's principals, and a growing understanding of the power of teachers' professional community as a lever for school reform. All these promising initiatives may be critically hampered, however, if "not enough time" remains their common experience and their common bond.

## Endnotes

[1]The average amount of formal instruction in the United States is 345 minutes. In Illinois it is 330 minutes. National Center for Education Statistics (1996).

[2]Newmann, Lopez, and Bryk (1998) and Smith, Smith, and Bryk (1998).

[3]Stodolsky (1988).

[4]The observation framework describes classroom life according to five influential features: teacher and student activity, student grouping, the topic under study, the materials used, and the cognitive demands placed on students. Instructional activities were coded as serving two broad categories of teaching and learning. The first was *knowledge and skill attainment* activities such as reading, listening, taking notes, answering short questions, and completing basic skills exercises (reading comprehension questions, grammar exercises, and math problem sets). The second category was *analysis and product production* activities that demanded analysis, hypothesizing, estimating, synthesizing, or the development of a unique product such as a paper, a poem, a map, a model, or other forms of presentation.

[5]Sebring et al. (1996), Roderick et al. (1997), Easton and Storey (1990).

[6]Many studies have looked at the concept and effects of on-task behavior and student engagement, including: Borg (1980), Good and Beckerman (1978), Marks (1995), Newmann (1992), Stallings (1980), Porter and Brophy (1988).

[7]Most school days in the surrounding Cook and McHenry County districts operate between 345 and 415 minutes daily.

[8]Section 4-14 of the CTU contract reads as follows: "The school hours of teachers in the (closed campus) day program shall be from 8:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. with a continuous duty-free lunch period of 45 minutes beginning at 2:30 p.m. at which time teachers may sign out for the day."

[9]"The Commission is convinced that if American students are to meet world-class standards, all children will need more academic time. Reclaiming the academic day means providing at least 5.5 hours of *core academic* instructional time daily. That time should be devoted exclusively to [English and language arts, mathematics, science, civics, history, geography, the arts, and foreign languages]." National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994), p.32.

[10]Purvis and Levine (1975), Stevenson and Stigler (1992), National Education Commission on Time and Learning (1994), and Schmidt et al.(1998).

[11]Borg (1980), Carroll (1989), Gettinger (1984), Karweit (1976), Walberg (1986), Wiley and Harnischfeger (1974).

[12]Rossmiller (1986), Stallings (1975), Fisher and Berliner (1985).

[13]Borg (1980), Rosenshine (1980).

[14]Denham and Lieberman (1980).

[15]Fisher and Berliner (1985), Fisher et al. (1978), Stallings (1975), Walberg (1986), Nelson (1990).

[16]See, for example, Borg (1980), Rosenshine (1980).

[17]To determine these figures, we restricted our sample of teachers to those we had observed three or more times.

[18]To calculate these figures we begin with the 330 minutes of the official school day. We subtract the 30 minutes officially provided for administrative demands, hall passing, and lunch. We subtract another 20 minutes based on our findings that teachers and students could not meet these demands within that 30 minutes. We now have 280 minutes of base instructional time. If we subtract 14 percent of that time as "non-instruction," we are left with 240 minutes of general instruction. Part of that 240 minutes is spent in a non-academic setting such as music. Music class is typically 40 minutes. Because we do not want to double count non-instructional time, we subtract six minutes (14 percent) from the 40 minute music class, leaving us with 34 minutes of music instruction. If we subtract that from 240, we are left with 206 minutes of core, academic instruction daily. On some days, however, students have two periods of nonacademic instruction, such as gym and library. On these days, their core instructional time dips to roughly 172 minutes.

Our process for calculating time in poorly managed classrooms proceeded the same way, only we used a 30 percent rate of non-instructional time.

[19]Adelman, Walking Eagle, and Hargreaves (1997), National Center for Education Statistics (1998).

[20]See Sebring et al. (1995), Marks and Louis (1997), and McLaughlin and Talbert (1993).

[21]Smylie et al. (1998).

[22]Consortium on Chicago School Research (1991), (1994), (1997).

[23]Information from Ursula Anderson at the CPS Substitute Center.

[24]Harris (1996) reports that many states have addressed the shortage of substitute teachers by relaxing the requirements, allowing parent volunteers or other noncertified adults to fill in for absent teachers. When there still are not enough subs to fill in, teachers may be pulled from their planning periods, or other school staff or administrators may be asked to cover a class. On such short notice, it is unlikely that even a well-qualified substitute will be prepared to give high-quality instruction.

[25]Storey et al. (1995), Kotlowitz (1992), McLaughlin (1994) and National Center for Education Statistics (1996a).

[26]The question on the survey was, "How much time passes at the start of the school year before you feel like your class(es) is in 'full swing'?" (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1997) [CD-ROM]. Data from this and other surveys are available by contacting the Consortium. The CD can be ordered through the web page: http:www.consortium-chicago.org.

[27]The survey question asked, "During the months of April, May, and June, what proportion of time will you use to introduce new material and tasks to students?" Slightly more than 1 percent of the teachers answered "none," 20.2 percent answered "1 to 25 percent," and 27.4 percent answered "26 to 50 percent" (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1997) [CD-ROM].

[28]Poe and Cohen (1998).

[29]See effective school research by Purkey and Smith (1983), Edmonds (1979), Zigarelli (1996), and Cohen (1987).

[30]See Darling-Hammond (1995), Perez (1997), Johnson (1990), and Sykes and Shulman (1983).

[31]See Sebring et al. (1995) for the first major Consortium report detailing the concept of professional community and its link to successful school improvement efforts in Chicago. See Designs for Change (1998) and Bryk et al. (1998) for preliminary results linking professional community to long term increases in schools' academic productivity. See the companion research paper—Smith, Smith, and Bryk (1998)—linking professional community to strong instructional coordination and pacing.

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As in all Consortium reports, we hope this publication will inform public understanding and discussion of the challenges Chicago's teachers and students face, and the supports they need, to reach the learning goals set by the Illinois State Board of Education.

# Notes

This report reflects the interpretations of the authors. Although the Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice and reviewed an earlier version of this report, no formal endorsement by these individuals, their organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

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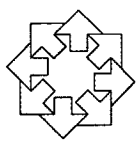

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